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Changing Places

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The Vietnam War has always been, to me, a distant incident: something terrible that took many of my friends' fathers, either physically or mentally. But luckily a football injury kept my father here. I was born in 1973 when Nixon was bringing the last American troops home, so my knowledge of Vietnam was colored by movies and history teachers talking about the Communists invading a small country and the United States helping them to preserve democracy. The closest the war got to my life was a visit to the new memorial in Washington, D.C., where my father saw the name of a high school friend, and I saw him cry for the first time. Then, on the eve of my 21st birthday, I saw a movie that prompted me to read a book that shattered all of my pre-conceived notions about not only the Vietnam War, but the Vietnamese themselves. The book, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places, by Le Ly Hayslip, is her account of what it was like to grow up in Vietnam.

Le Ly was born in 1947, the same year as my parents. While my parents grew up in a suburban, child-centered, baby-boomer society, Le Ly was working to re-build after the French occupation only to be caught in the middle as the Viet Cong and the Republican armies and later the American "advisors" struggled to control strategic hamlets. Before reading this book, I thought that all of the Vietnamese were conspiring to torture and kill our American soldiers in the name of Communism. Now I see that they were people trying to live as best they could in a terrible time, struggling to preserve their families and their beliefs in a civil war.

Young Le Ly was forced to spy for the Viet Cong, tor-

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tured by the Republican soldiers, and raped and exiled from her village. Her only way to survive was to go to Saigon and live as a beggar, unmarried and pregnant. Eventually, she was able to leave Vietnam and go to the United States. Throughout all of her hardships and with all of the injustices done to her, she has forgiven all of her persecutors. She believes that holding a grudge and seeking revenge only perpetrates the cycle of hatred.

Reading about this woman's heroic life and her generosity toward humanity has taught me to try and do the same in my life. It has taught me to use the hardships in my life to make me a stronger and better person. It has also taught me that there are two sides to every story, and how an event is perceived depends on the life and events of the person relaying the event. When I left that movie, which was told from the filmmakers' view, I felt embarrassed to be an American. After I read Le Ly Hayslip's own words, I felt glad to be a fellow human being sharing in the good and bad.